



Opening shot: at the Shenzhen/Hong Kong border, Mei crosses with a lunch pail.



Upon her client's arrival, Mei asks Mrs. Li to guess her age. Mrs. Li looks at Mei.



## Serving the people — *Dumplings*

by Chuck Kleinhans

“When they travel, goods become more precious and human life cheaper.”[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

In *Dumplings* (*Gaau ji*, aka *Gaudzi*, Hong Kong, 2004) director Fruit Chan presents a disturbing social satire using creepy taboo topics of cannibalism and abortion to pump up the shock and to underline ethical issues of capitalist culture. With a foundation in class politics, the feature interweaves grotesque horror imagery and a critique of the cult of youth and the commoditization of beauty in contemporary consumer society.[2]

The film tells the tale using three central characters. Miriam Yeung Chin-Wah plays Ching Li, an aging former television actress famous for her earlier ingénue roles. In the film's present she wants to regain her youth to keep her philandering husband's attention. Her husband, Mr. Li, a successful older businessman, played by Tony Leung Ka-Fai, writes his wife big checks to barely excuse his extramarital affairs. And Bai Ling enacts Auntie Mei, a former medical doctor in the PRC who now lives in Hong Kong making special dumplings which promise to rejuvenate those who consume them. Once the dumplings seem to be working, Mrs. Li wants faster results, which begins her downward spiral.

Because the film raises significant matters of contest and cross-cultural analysis, this article will proceed with a number of detours. I suggest readers can easily follow the essay in a non-linear fashion, navigating to key topics as they choose, and skipping one area to return later. The accompanying visual analysis also invites this hypertextual reading strategy.

Mei returns the gaze. This shot/reverse shot privileges the pair and binds them through comparison. Through much of the film the pair are bonded in mirror shots and two shots which invite comparison and contrast. The high point of this trope comes when they visit the Li's mansion which is being remodeled and discuss gender politics and their respective life choices.



Mr. Li first appears at the luxury hotel outdoor swimming pool in a modern high rise building on Hong Kong Island, the central business and financial district.

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## Synopsis, feature length version

An attractive 30-something woman, Mei, crosses from Mainland China to Hong Kong through immigration with a lunch pail. At home in a small apartment she begins to cook, sampling what appears to be a pink prawn.

Mrs. Ching Li, a well-dressed bourgeois woman, arrives at the public housing building and looks for Mei. While Mrs. Li waits, Mei prepares dumplings with ingredients she brought from the mainland. Mrs. Li tentatively takes the first one, but drops it. Mei tells her to think of the results, not what it was. While Mrs. Li finishes the dish, Mei sings and dances a traditional song.

At the outdoor pool of a luxury hotel, Mr. Li gets a foot massage from an attractive young woman with whom he flirts; he eats a delicacy, an egg with a recognizably developed chick. From inside Mrs. Li observes her husband.

In a mainland hospital, Mei obtains aborted fetuses to carry back to Hong Kong.

Returning, Mei prepares another serving of dumplings for Mrs. Li. Mr. Li and the masseuse are seen having sex. Mrs. Li returns to Mei and asks for faster results in rejuvenation.

As she leaves, a mother brings her pregnant schoolgirl daughter, asking for an abortion. Mei refuses, saying it is too risky, suggesting going to the mainland. The distressed mother pleads, finally saying her husband raped his 15 year

old daughter. Mei still refuses.

At the hotel, Mrs. Li sees the mistress leave a tray of food outside a door in the hallway and hears her husband's voice from behind the door.

With Mei along, Mrs. Li goes up into the Peak district to see the mansion she and her husband are remodeling while living in the hotel. Mrs. Li expresses her bitterness about her husband's affairs. Mei observes that Mrs. Li is rich, but Mei is free, her own boss; Mrs. Li will never divorce. Again Mrs. Li wants faster results.

Mei finds the mother and arranges for the abortion to be done. The abortion procedure is presented.

Afterwards, Mrs. Li arrives and Mei describes how the 5 month old fetus, a male and conceived by a virgin girl from her own father, is especially potent. Mrs. Li devours the (slightly crunchy) dumplings. A phone call informs her Mr. Li has broken his leg, and she returns to the hotel where he is in bed in a cast. She initiates sex play, saying he now needs her.

On a city bus, the schoolgirl is bleeding out from the abortion, and collapses on the street, her mother hysterical.

Mrs. Li caresses her skin; at a hotel dinner for a group of women, they remark on how she seems younger; but they also notice a fishy smell. Mrs. Li panics and takes a perfumed bath, calls Mei who says the smell is because the rejuvenation is working.

Mr. Li listens in to the call. He then appears at Mei's place, asking if it really works. Mei flirts with him and he has quick rough sex with her. He is stunned to discover she is actually in her 60s while appearing to be in her 30s.

Mrs. Li goes to her MD about her symptoms. Departing, she sees the mistress leaving a gynecologist's office while a staff person says she missed her ultrasound appointment and should call if she continues to have morning sickness. She finds Mei in the apartment building's beauty shop; Mei says she can't supply Mrs. Li anymore (implying to the audience that Mr. Li will now be her patron).

The police show up at the apartment of the dead schoolgirl to find the mother has stabbed her husband.

Mei is seen quickly leaving her apartment.



Mrs. Li meets the mistress in a restaurant and offers to pay her twice what Mr. Li would pay for the male she is carrying to come to term. Mrs. Li wants it aborted now.

Mei is seen in the mainland, appearing as a laborer on the street.

The abortion takes place in a gynecologist's office. Mrs. Li insists the procedure be done mechanically, not with chemicals; and she will take the fetus. She is seen preparing the aborted fetus for dumplings.

## Synopsis, short version

Eliminates the pregnant mistress line and Mr. Li meeting Mei. Mei directly proceeds with the schoolgirl's abortion.

Mrs. Li goes to her MD and discovers she is now pregnant. In the final sequence she induces an abortion to herself and then prepares the fetus for dumplings.

The short version is more like a wry fable with fewer characters examined. Mei's mercenary motivation is played down; Mrs. Lee's final scene seems to display her demented nature.



Upset because her body begins to smell fishy, Mrs. Li phones Mei.



Mr. Li listens in on the conversation and learns about Mei's special cuisine.

## Star image

Miram Yeung Chin Wah (b. 1974, HK) began a highly successful Cantopop singing career in 1995 and quickly became a star of romantic comedy films playing young women described variously by reviewers and in publicity as "sassy," "sparkling," "happy-go-lucky," "headstrong," "effervescent," and notable for infectious laughter. (The Madame Tussaud's museum in Hong Kong has a wax figure likeness which giggles.) Thus her role in *Dumplings* as a retired aging TV star involves significant casting against type. There's no frivolity in her performance, only a deepening seriousness of purpose, though we also see on television clips of her earlier performance as a giggling teen. [3]. The reruns provide a recurring reminder of her lost youth.

Tony Leung Ka Fai (b. 1958, HK) accumulated 92 acting film credits from 1983 to 2006 playing mostly serious dramas. (Not to be confused with Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) He has appeared in a wide variety of roles, often emphasizing his conventionally handsome looks, e.g., *Election*, *Ashes of Time*, *Centre Stage*, *The Lover* (Fr.), *Prison on Fire*.



Mei listens to Mrs. Li's anxieties. Throughout the films she touches her body: caressing her breasts, adjusting her bra, examining her bare feet, scratching. She swigs wine while cooking, eats snacks that require breaking a seed pod and discarding the shell, wipes sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.



While talking with Mei, Mrs. Li sees a rerun of her TV show, shot 15 years before. Seeing herself as a 20-year-old playing a teen schoolgirl, Mrs. Li begins to break down and cry over her lost youth.

Bai Ling (b. 1970, Chengdu, China) began a stage-acting career in China before moving to the US in the early 1990s where she has appeared largely in supporting roles in TV and film dramas, often as an exotic Asian. In *Red Corner* (1997) she played the Richard Gere character's assigned Chinese lawyer; he convinces her he is falsely accused, and the pair must challenge a corrupt justice system. (Predictably, official China hated the film.) She played Tuptim in *Anna and the King* (1999), and is the lead in the forthcoming German feature *Shanghai Baby* (2007).

A January 2005 *Playboy* pictorial hyped the Dragon Lady image with highly exaggerated eye makeup and projected Chinese calligraphy on her nude body and a Chinese character tattoo above her crotch. A Google image search turns up many red carpet appearances and "nipple slip" paparazzi photos.

In *Dumplings* she portrays a 60-something woman who served as a doctor in China, performing thousands of abortions, but who maintains her 30-something appearance by eating aborted fetuses. As Auntie Mei she dresses in colorful bold pattern skinny pants, presents her earthy body with broad physical gestures, eagerly seduces Mr. Lee who begins vigorous sex with her bent over the kitchen table, has a slightly mocking conversational style, and enacts an energetic dumpling maker.[4] In contrast, Mrs. Lee presents herself with a highly controlled upper class decorum, dressed in expensive garments and accessories, and a restricted body language, even in lovemaking with her husband.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mei's tenement is old and part of a large complex (one of the identical buildings is numbered 40).

Kowloon is the lower class and more distinctly culturally Chinese peninsula across from wealthy, British, and cosmopolitan Hong Kong Island.



Visiting the Li's house during the remodeling, Mei realizes how wealthy they are.

## Gender and class in a market economy

*Dumplings* dramatizes/allegorizes neoliberal transnational capitalism. Capitalism is commonly divided into three sectors. The primary production sector creates capital through extraction of primary resources (mining, oil drilling, agriculture — farming and animal husbandry, forestry, fishing, etc.). The secondary sector creates capital through transforming raw materials, manufacturing (light and heavy) and construction. Finally, the tertiary sector works in the area of services ranging from its most everyday face as retail to corporate machinations including finance, insurance, and so forth.

The film is set within the specific location of Hong Kong (HK Special Administrative Region) and the cross-border adjoining urban area of Shenzhen. Shenzhen is famous for being the first of the Special Economic Zones established by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. It has been spectacularly successful and essentially went from being a backwater to a boomtown within a decade. China's busiest port, Shenzhen is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, completing a high rise building every day of the year. The cost of labor here is much less than in adjoining Hong Kong, and although located in the southern region where Cantonese is spoken (also the common language of Hong Kong), actually Mandarin is the most commonly spoken language with migrants from all over China who were attracted by the opportunities for employment. The city is one of the most productive for manufacturing. For example, almost all Apple iPods and laptops are made here.

This is itself a significant aspect of the place. Like economic zones around the developing world (Mexico, Indonesia, India, Philippines, etc.), the opportunity for employment heavily draws people from impoverished rural areas and simultaneously changes basic social patterns. Essentially this repeats the general pattern of industrial capitalism driving people off the land and into urban factories in the 19th century West.

For example, single women can find better paying

employment than in their home communities, but are then detached from traditional family structures and customs. This has both positive and negative aspects. It frees the women from conservative patriarchal tradition, giving them freedom to earn and spend and live without traditional supervision. Yet they are alienated from their families, heavily supervised in the workplace, and face working conditions that are often harsh, without government regulation or unions to protect basic workers rights. They often must labor in unsafe and unhealthy workplaces and under other sweatshop conditions.

The particular form this takes in China relates to the *hukou* system, in which people are registered by family residency, which keeps people linked to their birthplace. But this has been drastically changed by large-scale migration, especially from rural areas to urban areas. The new arrivals are, for the most part, “undocumented aliens,” who do not have access to many government services such as healthcare because they lack proof of legal residency.

The film begins with Mei transiting from Shenzhen to Hong Kong at the border immigration checkpoint. She carries a familiar metal lunchpail (like the tiffin-box in India). Yet as we soon discover, she is actually smuggling her “special foreign ingredient” into Hong Kong. Of course, Hong Kong is best known as an *entrepot*, a port city established for trade, being an interface between materials taken from the inland area (the Mainland) and perhaps offering some added value in manufacturing (thus taking raw silk and making cloth or clothing) before exporting.

Thus what we actually witness on this specific character narrative level is an allegory of China/Hong Kong economic relations. China produces raw materials by extraction (literally, in this film, by abortion to produce dead fetuses), which are then taken to Hong Kong by Mei (smuggling), where they are transformed by artisan manufacturing (making the dumplings in her kitchen) and served up as part of a service economy to an eager consumer (the wealthy Mrs. Li). Mei lives in an old public housing project in Kowloon.[5]

## Mrs. Li and class

The dumplings are consumed by Mrs. Li, who is a secondary or parasitic member of the elite class of capitalists; she herself produces nothing of value. Even when she throws a party for her women friends, it is a catered affair in the luxurious hotel in which the couple lives — with all the

preparations, cooking, service, and cleaning done by the hotel staff — while the mansion residence is being remodeled. Her only labor is to choose a bottle of wine to be served.



Mr. Li explains he will be out of town, though he'd promised earlier to stay for their 15th anniversary. He writes a check and gives it to her:

Mrs. Li. So many zeroes.

Mr. Li. I'll only be gone four or five days, and if not, I'll write you another check as a fine.

Mrs. Li. Fines are for mistakes.

In discussion with Mei, she says she knows of her husband's affairs and would not be upset if he was discrete, but he doesn't hide them. Mei responds that she thinks Mrs. Li will never divorce; Mei did divorce her husband and declares she is "free," self sufficient in making a living. But Mrs. Li is locked into simply being a trophy wife, and as such her physical beauty is her main asset, yet one with declining value as she ages. Thus for her, arresting age is not simply a matter of vanity or pride, but has a material basis in protecting her financial well-being.

Mei: Wow! Your home is so grand!

Mrs. Li: So? It's empty! It's a house, not a home. My husband is probably with some young girl now.

Mei: Didn't he notice your change?

Mrs. Li: I can't wait. I need your best stuff.

Mei: For youth and beauty, we women are always busy fighting our age.

Mrs. Li: I used to always laugh when I was young. I joined the TV station right after high school. I became a hot star at once. Li was the sponsor of my show. We met when I was doing a stunt. I fell and he held me.

Mei: So you married him?

Mrs. Li: I was 20 then. Every girl at that age dreams of a perfect marriage. He was in his thirties and he loved me. I thought I would live happily ever after.

Mei: All men love chicks in their twenties.

Mrs. Li: They do so in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and so on. It's the law of nature. They just can't resist the body of a 20-year-old. I can accept that, as long as he doesn't flaunt it.

Mei: Men are all the same. (chuckles) All they know is sex. What's so good about a 20-year-old



bimbo?

Mrs. Li: And you?

Mei: (sighs) Worse. I broke up with my first love and married an uncultured man. A cook! Back then, we mainlanders all wanted to come to Hong Kong. We would do anything just to get a Hong Kong ID. As for me...(hmm) I struggled hard before I could get my residency. But then, I also got divorced. I don't think you dare get a divorce. Women like you are everywhere. Be glad you know me. Otherwise...in five years, you'll be an ex-wife. (hmm) In ten years, an ex-ex. And in 15 years, you'll be nothing. Unlike you, I'm my own boss. You may be rich, but I am free.

## Mr. Li and class

Mr. Li is a highly successful capitalist, but is never shown in a workplace such as a factory, or construction site, or offices in the financial district, etc. Rather, he only seems to conduct business on the phone: poolside at the hotel or in his temporary suite while the house is being remodeled. He seems to be the paradigm of the tertiary sector capitalist: producing no material thing, but moving money around as an occupation. He is remote from the workplace, the place for actual production of value. He travels and is gone for several days at a time, and he conducts affairs with his mistress in the same hotel, on the same floor. He writes checks to his wife to make up for his emotional detachment. And he eats eggs with well-formed chicks in them; said to be rejuvenating.

## The mistress and class

We first meet Connie Zhao, the young woman, while she gives Mr. Li a foot massage next to the swimming pool. He playfully tries to caress her, and she gently rebuffs and scolds him while laughing.



Poolside, Mr. Li enjoys a “goodie,” an egg with a highly developed chick. The 2004 film appeared

Later we see her having sex with Li, and even later observed by Mrs. Li emerging from a gynecologist's office, revealing her pregnancy. In the denouement, Mrs. Li arranges a meeting with her in a classy restaurant where the two negotiate the terms of the mistress's abortion. The masseuse shows her cold-blooded calculation: she is young, five months pregnant, and only has to carry four more months. Mr. Li is not only paying her now but will pay for the male

within the active memory of the 1997-98 Hong Kong “bird flu” epidemic during which at government order, all poultry in the region was destroyed. While many Chinese people have eaten or commonly know of this dish, after the epidemic it resonates with a certain danger.



Mr. Li enjoys his massage while opening a delicacy egg.



Mistress: "The pay would be enough for me to live well for a while." In Hong Kong, the cash nexus dictates the bottom line.

heir; she's young and can use the cash to jump-start her adult life.

Mrs. Li's counter-offer is just as calculating:

Mrs. Li: My husband is back with me. I won't let go again. Give up.

Ms. Zhao: I've expected it all along.

Mrs. Li: But you're pregnant.

Ms. Zhao: He doesn't mind. He wanted a son.

Mrs. Li: And if it's a girl?

Ms. Zhao: Then I charge less. I'm in.

Mrs. Li: You sure?

Ms. Zhao: I'm five months along. Only four more months to do. I'm young. I can spare the time. The pay would be enough for me to live well for a while.

Mrs. Li: I want your baby.

Ms. Zhao: Why? Inheritance issues?

Mrs. Li: I want your baby now.

Ms. Zhao: Now?

Mrs. Li: Abort it. You can be free again, and I can rest assured. I'll double whatever he's paying you. How about that.

We are lead to assume that Mrs. Li's motivation is to remove her rival from the scene and make sure there is no (culturally highly valued) male child to distract her husband. She deliberately disrupts filial succession. With the deal struck, the pair appear at the gynecologist's office for the procedure: Mrs. Lee wants to watch, insists on an induction without chemicals, and wants to carry away the fetus. It is only in the final scene when we fully understand her motives: she begins to chop up the fresh fetus to make dumplings for her own consumption.

## The schoolgirl, her mother, and class

As Mrs. Li departs after a dumpling meal, a mother arrives





As Mrs. Li leaves, having asked for more potent dumplings, a mother arrives with her pregnant daughter, seeking an abortion.



Mei declines, saying it's illegal.



Mei tells them to go to the Mainland. The mother says she can't afford it.

with her schoolgirl daughter, explaining the child is pregnant. Mei confirms the pregnancy and the mother pleads for an abortion, urging her silent daughter to plea for help. Mei refuses, telling the mother it can be done safely in Shenzhen; the mother replies that they cannot afford that. Again Mei refuses. The mother pleads: the girl just 15, a child, how could she care for a baby? Again Mei defers; finally the mother says that the girl was raped by her father. Mei still refuses (in the feature version; in the short she then begins the procedure).

But after visiting the remodeling of the mansion with Mrs. Li, and realizing how wealthy the Li's are, and how desperate the wife is for a faster rejuvenating process, Mei stops at the mother's apartment to say she will do the procedure. Mei's motivation is thus strongly marked as mercenary.

The abortion proceeds without chemical intervention, with Mei only inducing a catheter, which takes much longer and puts the mother at much greater risk. Riding the bus on the way home, the post-operative girl begins to bleed out, and then collapses on the street with her mother hysterical.

The film returns to their apartment when police respond and we find the mother has murderously stabbed her husband next to an altar to the dead teen. Thus this story line also disrupts filial succession.

## Mei and class

Mei is introduced only as a dumpling maker who promises her clients a food that will bring youth. In the next sequence, she is seen in a mainland hospital in Shenzhen, buying black-market aborted fetuses. We learn she used to work there. At the Shenzhen hospital, Mei's nurse-procurer points out Mei's ex.

Staff woman: Why did you two break up?

Mei: It was long ago. He loathed the one-child policy. But I was aborting over 10 fetuses a day. That was 3,000 a year; 30,000 in ten years. He was afraid I would have a cursed child for all the deaths I caused. It was a national policy.

Staff woman: Indeed.

Mei: I was only serving the people!

Staff woman: Indeed! Bye, then.





Mei declines to perform the procedure on the first visit.



Returning home after the abortion, the daughter bleeds out and collapses.



Police arrive to find the mother has stabbed the father in front of the altar to their dead child: enlarged student ID photo, traditional Buddhist incense and fruit, and Mickey pattern curtains.

The Mao's directive to the party cadres, "Serve the people," in the PRC past, (and under socialism providing state health care for the masses during the one family/one child policy) becomes, in the Hong Kong present, working in the food service sector preparing dumplings for a wealthy clientele. The communist slogan, "Serve the People," becomes the capitalist advertising slogan, MacDonald's hamburgers: "Billions Served."

In contrast to the Li's, privileged native Hong Kongers, "flexible citizens" who occupy only a transnational cosmopolitan space, Mei is adept at kitchen work, and knows Chinese history and culture, giving Mr. Li a lesson about the long and legendary history of infanticide and cannibalism in Chinese history.

Mei's self-presentation is disarming, witty, and sometimes ironic. Her hair is always slightly loose, her gestures rather broad. She dresses in contrasting splashy bold prints, wears tight pants, and low cut tops that show her breasts when she bends over.

In contrast, Mrs. Li presents herself as especially conservative and insecure (perfectly coiffed with everything in place, dressed always in stylish and pricey designer fashions, keeping her matching purse nearby, and restrained in gesture and movement).

During the abortion sequence Mei works efficiently and with the kind of "routine sincerity" of a medical professional, offering a kind of supportive cheer. In her meeting with Mr. Li, Mei is sexy and seductive, and she clearly eyes him up as her main chance.

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At the Shenzhen hospital with  
Mei's nurse procurer. Mei used to  
work there.

### Theme: perverse sentiments

In *Sentimental Fabulations*, Rey Chow lays out the cluster of thematic concepts she sees as the affective “mode” of the sentimental. She argues we must see China as existing in transition, with both residual cultural patterns as well as progressive ones overlapping. The present is in dynamic flux. Borrowing Raymond Williams’ term, “structures of feeling,” she examines a group of contemporary films from prestige dramatic directors who essentially work in the area of melodrama (though she disavows that term, saying her concerns cover a different terrain).[12][[open notes in new window](#)]

As in her earlier books on Chinese film, *Primitive Passions* and *Ethics After Idealism* Chow concentrates on mainstream “serious,” “well made” (and fairly middle-brow) film that has film festival and art-house circulation in the West.[13]

Chow identifies eleven key situations of “sentimental fabulations.” In *Dumplings* these situations are completely absent or turned perverse.

- *Filiality*

(indebtedness to elders, demand for filial piety).

The three central characters have no elders; they abort those who would make them elders; the schoolgirl is betrayed by being raped by her father.

- *Domesticity*

(household arrangements of caring, tending, nursing, etc.).

The Li’s domesticity is purchased, assigned to servants (the masseuse, the maid, the hotel waiters, etc.) framed in elite cosmopolitan consumption. Mr. Li writes checks to substitute for emotional contact. Only when he has a broken leg does his wife tend to him, noting now that he’s helpless, he needs her. Mei provides a commodified domesticity through food preparation, small talk, and with Mr. Li, sex.



- *Food*

(preparation, consumption, sharing/offering; source of intimacy, pathos, and/or sinocentrism).

Mr. Li consumes nearly-hatched eggs; entertaining her female friends, Mrs. Li depends on the hotel to cater it. Mei prepares and serves dumplings, but they are inherently perverse items, not made or received in love; she does know the historical/cultural resonance of dumplings and cuisine in Chinese society.

- *Poverty*

(deprivation, powerlessness; and valorization of frugality).

The Li's operate at the top of the privilege pyramid; once made an outlaw, Mei is shown as a survivor, living by her wits on the street.

- *Childhood/old age*

(worthy because dependent).

Neither is present; the characters are or become childless, even the schoolgirl's mother. Mei lies about having a child to explain border crossing (that is smuggling) with her lunch pail. Throughout the film, perversely reversing the "natural order" of aging depends on the destruction of prenatal life.

- *Physical labor*

(represented or known).

All the Li's needs are met by servants; from the start Mei is shown working: transporting fetuses, making dumplings, serving food, performing an abortion, providing sex, and finally on the run, carrying her means of production on a bamboo yoke. The mistress provides sexual services. The schoolgirl, and later the mistress, undergo a long labor to deliver their fetuses.

- *Togetherness and separation*

(travel, migration, illness, life's transience).

The Li's seem to travel internationally (she to London for a few days to see a nephew; he on "business") and effortlessly; Mei moved from the PRC to Hong Kong, and also transits back and forth to Shenzhen to acquire her ingredients, and finally escapes there to avoid prosecution in Hong Kong.

- *Preference for familial/social harmony*

(vs. discord; demands for self-restraint and self-sacrifice).

The Li's marriage is only formal; their "real" household is under renovation; they consume others. The schoolgirl's mother stabs her husband. Mei, divorced, has no family,

only clients.

- *Passing of time*  
(irreversible; nostalgia).

Mei has perversely reversed time, aging, and promises the same for her customers. Her apartment is filled with “old” things, old furniture. The Li’s live in a cosmopolitanized present with no heritage. The periodical re-runs of Mrs. Li’s TV show reminds her of time passage, but provoke anxiety and desperation, not nostalgia.

- *Manifestations of nature*  
(visual metaphors of change, conditions that humans must learn to accept).

The dumplings defy nature, transience, loss. The film is shot entirely within man-made urban space. Only the visit to the mansion indicates any green nature, and it is framed by the mechanical Peak Tram; even at the house, “nature” is animal statues.

- *The non-negotiable imperative to reproduce biologically*  
(responsibility to preserve the family line).

Mrs. Li in both the short and feature versions defies this cultural demand. The schoolgirl is doubly victimized. Mei is the agent of destruction.

Rey Chow concludes her examination of the sentimental mode with the observation,

“As the affect of accommodation, compromise, and settlement, the sentimental — which I myself consider to be the great Chinese theme... — is a form of thinking-cum-living that, to put it forthrightly, is the opposite of nomadism. Hence its potency, paradoxically, to move (us). Accordingly, the scenarios most effectively dramatized in this sentimental mode are often other than those of defiance, rebellion, flight, or absolute departure.” (p. 199)

In sharp contrast, *Dumplings* changes and challenges the sentimental situations through perversions. The conservative momentum of social stability is perverted under contemporary capitalism to the most vicious dog-eat-dog, or human-eat-fetus frenzy.

## The writer

The screenplay was adapted from a novella, “The

Dumplings of Yue Mei's Attic." [14] Well-known Hong Kong novelist and screenwriter Lilian Lee has written over 30 books. She is a popular novelist on the mainland as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. Numerous films have been made from her novels, such as:

1. *Rouge* (d. Stanley Kwan, 1987),
2. *The Romance of the Golden Lotus* (Clara Law, 1989),
3. *Kawashima Yoshiko* (Eddie Ling-Ching Fong, 1990; aka *The Last Princess of Manchuria*),
4. *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993),
5. *Temptation of a Monk* (Clara Law, 1993),
6. *White Snake, Green Snake* (Tsui Hark, 1993)
7. The story for *Dumplings*.

Throughout her screenplays (and novels) the situation of women in moments of historical transition grounds the narrative. For example, the unfairly neglected *Kawashima Yoshiko* provided the late Anita Mui her finest role as a Manchurian Princess sent to Japan out of political reasons of statecraft, who then becomes accomplished in martial skills, and who returns to the China mainland of the turbulent 30s and 40s as a military leader. At the end of the Pacific war she is held by the Chinese as a traitor while she defends herself as Japanese and deserving repatriation to Japan. Set against the large historical stage of East Asia in the first half of the 20th century, the film presents the precarious position of a talented, ambitious, skilled woman negotiating treacherous patriarchal power. Similarly, *Dumplings* presents Mrs. Li, the mistress, and Mei as working their best options within a contemporary patriarchal capitalist system.

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### Cannibalism and the fetus image

The dumplings are made from fetuses, providing the magic totem for rejuvenation, and the narrative's illegal/immoral boundaries. While many cultures throughout history exhibit “sympathetic magic” — the belief that eating a totem allows one to absorb its power — China has been especially identified with this idea in recent times. Because its traditional medicine includes making cures from ingredients including insects and animals, and because the traditional culture ascribes curative powers to certain animal organs (from such as tigers, bears, rhinos, and sea turtles), recent highly publicized endangered species policies and enforcement against poaching and smuggling brought attention to the Chinese market.

Cannibalism is often treated with a certain comic touch in film, recognizing the taboo while flirting with its grotesqueness and exaggerating the matter (for example, the dining sequence in *Hannibal* [d. Ridley Scott, 2001]). But the fetus image can seldom be used for comic effect in the same way.[6][[open notes in new window](#)] Two factors have shaped this in the past 40 years. First, technological advances in medical imaging, including photography, allow for a much more detailed and thus “realistic” visualization of the fetus. Photographs of a developing fetus in the uterus usually result in astonishment and awe at this depiction of normally unseen life. Sequential developmental photos also evoke wonder and amazement at the revelation of a previously hidden process. Thus, we have a way of imagining prenatal life today that previous generations could know only through medical drawings, for the most part.[7] Educational documentaries such as the PBS *Nova* series, the Discovery Channel, and works aimed specifically at classroom exhibition make these new visuals widely available.

The fetus as image has one resonance in East Asia, but a different one in the U.S. framework. The most important factor in terms of public understanding of fetus images in the U.S. is the success of the anti-abortion movement in taking over the visual culture of “the unborn” (their term) with explicit photos of aborted fetuses. Soon after the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 liberalized U.S. abortion laws, abortion opponents organized public demonstrations, including marches and picketing of abortion providers, often using large photos of aborted fetuses to make their case visually.[8] While many who adapted the

“pro-life” position sought change through traditional legal and political means, a very significant wedge of the movement sought an intensely confrontational approach and used the visual support of “atrocious” images to justify their militancy and in particular their in-your-face intimidation of abortion service clients.

The other side, the “pro-choice” position, did not have any particular visuals to support their argument. At best, one might see in Planned Parenthood, a national organization supporting female reproductive rights and services, images of happy (small) families, smiling moms with babies, and so forth. In U.S. campus newspaper ads, visuals show young women expressing confidence in controlling their reproductive capacity. And commercial television ads promote a variety of products for birth control, control of or protection from sexually transmitted diseases, more convenient menstrual cycles, etc.

In part the signifying absence of fetal images in the pro-choice camp is the obvious visual logic of “a picture can’t say ain’t” — that is there is no visual marker for absence or positing a negative.[9] But it also reflects the problem of defining the prenatal tissue as having “life,” or being “human,” or having “consciousness” or a “soul.” These qualities cannot be established by visual evidence alone, since they rest on a more complex (and contestable) understanding that derives from science, philosophy, and religion, and which are not precise, socially agreed upon, or self-evident in the law. In the contest for public opinion and personal belief, the human-likeness of a fetus comes through visually. [10] The questions of what is human, when human life begins, when a fetus is a recognizable individual in religious and moral terms, as well as legal terms that command state intervention for protection, remain unsettled and contentious.[11]

## Disturbing images

The film uses a deliberately slow build up of visceral disturbance involving the images of the fetuses and abortion.



Mei begins the food prep and puts the (as yet unexplained) special ingredient in a bowl with fresh slices of ginger root.



While doing the kitchen work, Mei picks one up; it slips and drops; she picks it up and eats it raw.



On a later visit, Mrs. Li wants to accelerate the process. The audience now knows Mei's background as an abortionist on the Mainland, and



that the “special ingredient” is fetuses. Mei gives an enthusiastic verbal description.

Mrs. Li. Do you have more potent stuff for faster results?

Mei. The best are those in the fifth or sixth month. You have to remove it by breaking the water sac, then sliding it out. It's covered by a layer of creamy fat. The colors are defined. You can even see the cranium. Its tiny limbs will still be moving around. (laughs) It's only this big in the first trimester. But the meat will be tough by the third trimester. The fifth-month ones are perfect, kitten-like. So cute and so nutritious.







Mei returns to the kitchen and we get the first explicit close up of the flesh: translucent, looking like Gummi Bears candy.



After her verbal description, Mei confronts Mrs. Li directly with a fetus. Mei's tone and style seems to combine the somewhat offhanded materialism of a professional cook toward the ingredients, a skilled surgical MD who had regularly performed 3,000 medical abortions a

year, and a certain mild class antagonism, seeing if she can shock the proper bourgeois woman, her client.



Mrs. Li's response is to eat the meal without her previous hesitation and to ask on leaving for Mei to call her if she can obtain stronger stuff.



Later, knowing how wealthy the Li's are, Mei advises the mother that she will perform the schoolgirl's abortion. She begins in her apartment, inserting a catheter.



Mei avoids using drugs to speed contractions and labor; as a result the labor is protracted.







The fetus is delivered. Mei cuts the umbilical cord, and she tells the mother and schoolgirl to rest for a while.



Mrs. Li arrives for another meal; curious, she peeks into the kitchen and sees Mei with the fresh fetus and placenta from the schoolgirl's abortion. She panics and runs outside.





But she returns shortly, and in this mirror shot finds Mei in a reverie or mildly ecstatic state, caressing her breast.



The pair regard the fetus together.



And they begin the dumpling making.



Mei chooses to make steamed dumplings.



In the final sequence, following the mistress's abortion, Mrs. Li handles the male fetus...and a meat cleaver.

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# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Declining to perform an abortion, Mei is set among her ceramic statues, a syncretic collection, while nonchalantly eating melon balls. The pleading mother's head appears in the mirror while below the lower part of the pregnant daughter's body is reflected in the glass of the cabinet.



In a final appeal, the mother reveals her husband raped the daughter while the visual shifts to their image reflected in the TV set and the glass cabinet.

## The cinematographer

Christopher Doyle is the best known Hong Kong cinematographer, having done camera for all of Wong Kar-Wai's films.[15][[open notes in new window](#)] Doyle is a master of exquisite planimetric compositions which expressively imbed characters in places, especially in interiors.

He is also a virtuoso of the moving camera, as seen in two sequences in *Dumplings*. In the first, visiting the mansion under construction, Mrs. Li and Mei have a conversation about the gender politics of their respective histories and situations. The scene is done as a fluid long take (*plan séquence*) in the space filled with construction materials, with workmen seen outside through translucent green tarps. The two actors move, as does the camera, and the blocking heightens different enunciations, with men literally on the outside, oblivious to the women's concerns and the women's understanding of how the world distributes power and (relative) freedom.

The second sequence involves Mei hosting Mr. Li and seducing him. Again there is a moving camera in the constricted space of her apartment. But rather than continuous dialogue, the scene is shot in several takes from different camera positions, and then edited without strict linear temporal continuity. The sequence quickly moves from synch dialogue into non-synch monologue by Mei explaining the long history of cannibalism in China. While partly a way of her verbally controlling the situation while she displays her body, the effect as she serves Mr. Li dumplings and suggestively moves about the space is to link cannibalism to erotic seduction. It works, and he takes her roughly on the table, ending in his orgasm and his simultaneous realization that she is 64 years old, and he is having sex with "an old woman."

Mr. Li. You're doing illegal trade in here.

Mei. No, this is just a dumpling shop.





Within an elaborate dolly shot, another planimetric composition places men outside the domestic space of the women's discussion.



Mr. Li visits Mei.

Mr. Li. But you advocate cannibalism. (pause)  
Does it really work?

Mei. Please take a seat. I'll prove it to you. (cut)  
Sit here please. (pause) You should never consider cannibalism immoral in China. It has existed since history began. Li's Herbalist Handbook clearly stated that human flesh and organs are admissible ingredients for medical recipes.

Mei. (v.o.) During famines neighbors traded and cooked each other's children for survival. The famous chef Yi Ya heard that his emperor wanted to try human flesh. He butchered and served his son as a course to the monarch. Tales abound of caring sons and daughters cutting off flesh for their parents' medicines.

The classic "Water Margin" depicted heroes who savored their enemies. One even served buns with human flesh filling. The Japanese have definitely eaten many Chinese. You think our country could have got through all these wars and famines without consuming human flesh? What about out of pure hatred — to skin you and eat you alive? Our national hero Yue Fei once wrote, "Pep up with a meal of the invaders' flesh. Celebrate with a drink of the invaders' blood."

When two people are deeply in love, all they desire to to be inside each other. Inside each other's skin. Inside each other's guts.

## The director

Fruit Chan's films are known for their realist aesthetics, both in cinematic style and subject matter. In some works this tends to the comic-grotesque, most notably to date in his controversial *Public Toilet* (2002). His comic imagination appears in *Dumplings* in various ways. At times it emerges as a setup to a more disturbing point. For example, riding home on a bus after the abortion, we first have a close up of blood dripping from the edge of a bus seat. It's not immediately clear what is happening, but the next shot locates the mother-daughter pair getting up to leave the bus. Two young fellows involved in an animated discussion of their plans get on the bus and sit in the now-empty seat. Suddenly one of them holds up his hand, covered in blood,

and bolts upright revealing the seat of his white pants covered in blood. This physical joke is immediately replaced by a long shot showing the girl falling to the pavement and then a close up panning from her bloody legs to her mother crying in distress. The farcical set up leads directly to the films most pathetic tragedy.

Throughout the film, the plot moves with an extraordinary amount of coincidence, accidentally overheard conversations, and foreboding. For example, in a night time sequence, when Mr. Li leaves Mei's after dumplings and sex, she directs him down one walkway while we see the arrival of Mrs. Li who has just shown up trying to get more dumplings, after her phone call interrupted the sex. A girl in a schoolgirl uniform, looking at first much like the deceased one walks the same walkway, and Mr. Li turns the corner just as Mrs. Li enters from a stairway at the other end. While a situation from French bedroom farce, with the spouse appearing just as the partner exits, the sequence has an uncanny feel with the schoolgirl's presence, and a haunting repetition of an older woman getting a facial treatment at the end of the walkway (we saw her in the same situation daytime in the opening sequence of Mrs. Li's first arrival). The sequence is compounded by including a long shot from across the way in another tenement, with an indistinct foreground figure, hinting at surveillance of the scene.



Mrs. Li tries to ascertain the unpleasant smell at her elegant party.

In a more straightforward comic narrative moment, Mrs. Li hosts a fancy luncheon for her high society female friends at the hotel. They remark about how vibrant she looks and speculate on what her “secret” is. But as she joins them at the table, they begin to notice a funny smell. She tries to elegantly smell the meat on her plate, and then realizes she's the one who is starting to smell. She runs from the room and in panic begins to take a heavily scented bath. Jokes disguise aggression, and clearly in this case it is class commentary: humiliating the bourgeois woman with stink.

Recently, critics have discussed Fruit Chan in terms of his unfinished “Prostitute Trilogy.” *Durian Durian* (2000) is a brilliant portrait of a young woman from northern China who in the first half of the film is seen working as a prostitute in Hong Kong and who then returns to her home town with her primitive accumulation of capital to decide what to do next in the mainland's transition from socialism to capitalism. The 2001 film *Hollywood Hong-Kong* also has a prostitute from the mainland as the central figure disrupting the lives of inhabitants of a Hong Kong shantytown village that abuts a luxury mall and condominium complex. While



Chan has not completed the planned trilogy, Mei in *Dumplings*, bears comparison with the other two women. As Wendy Gan describes the central character in *Durian Durian*:

"In the film Yan represents the emergence of the modern mainland Chinese woman — individualistic, shrewd, independent and mobile. She exercises her right of mobility, moving from the depressed north to the bright lights of southern China and Hong Kong. Though married, she acts in an unfettered manner. ... Enterprising and bold, she unabashedly commodifies herself as a prostitute in the relative anonymity of Hong Kong for profit. Her mercenary excursion into Hong Kong provides her with a financial independence." [16]

Similarly, Tong Tong in *Hollywood Hong-Kong* uses her active wits to gain whatever advantage she can within the patriarchal capitalism of Hong Kong. Yet Tong Tong gets what she wants, at the end appearing in Los Angeles with the money she acquired from prostitution and blackmail. Yan thinks of becoming a shopkeeper with her newly obtained capital, but in an elegiac finale decides to return to her original training as a performer.

"Unable to push ahead into the future, Yan retreats into the past. After a nostalgic visit to her Chinese opera school with her old school friends, and a backstage visit to Li Shuang's Chinese opera company, we discover that Yan is the painted Chinese opera street performer onstage along at the films' close. Despite her earlier statements that she no longer remembered her opera moves Yan ultimately returns to the opera, defining herself in terms of the past." [17]

Similarly, although Mei is not a prostitute, she operates in the illegal sector with her dumplings, and given the opportunity, trades sex for money with Mr. Li. So, while not formally a part of the Trilogy, figuratively *Dumplings* does stand in close relation to it. After making the connection with the husband, she cuts off Mrs. Li, is seen having her hair done while she paints her toes, and on the phone makes a meeting with Mr. Li. Her plans are cut short by the police investigating the schoolgirl's death, but she, like Yan, returns to the mainland, a street-savvy survivor.



After hurriedly leaving her apartment, Mei re-appears on the street in Shenzhen.



She's carrying her means of production: a charcoal cooker, a frying pan, and supplies.

Given Fruit Chan's most distinct theme — the depiction of



class — as detailed in this issue by Wimal Dissanayake, the most memorable presentation is in the two abortion sequences. As Ian Johnston points out,

"Class differences were already apparent in Ching's first visit to the tenement block and the subsequent change of scene to her husband Mr. Lee on the rooftop swimming pool; the theme is quite explicit in the contrast between the film's two abortions. In the first, the lower-class mother and daughter have no recourse but to an illegal and dangerous abortion performed by Mei. The second abortion is procured by Ching herself as, abandoned by Auntie Mei, she sets out to acquire the dumpling ingredients herself; the child is that of her husband's mistress (a woman of her own class). It's Ching's money, her class-based wealth, that can arrange this abortion in a safe medical environment. No contrast could be stronger: this second abortion is a financial transaction between wife and mistress, where both come out winners, getting what they want. The first abortion is literally a question of existence, a matter of life and death, a situation that ultimately leads to the death of both mother and daughter." [18]



On her first visit, Mrs. Li notices an old mirrored sign, "Yue Mei's Loft," which might be a nostalgic remnant of an earlier dumpling shop, amid the paint-peeling walls and ceramic statues, such as this one of a smiling Buddha surrounded by cherubic babies.



Mei's collection of figurines includes (l. to r.) a female "barefoot doctor," emblematic of the early revolutionary era when young volunteer semi-professionals went out to rural areas to deliver basic health care to the peasants.

Another key aspect of Fruit Chan's realism appears in the interior details, highlighted by production design and cinematography. These details are central to both narrative and character development. Mei claims that her tenement apartment is just a dumpling shop, but the details hint at other stories or histories. On her first visit, Mrs. Li sees a mirror sign, the type announcing a shop, but Mei has only one table. The sign seems old, as if salvaged from another stage of her life when she did have a more conventional shop (at another point she indicates she came to Hong Kong with her then-husband, a cook).

Similarly, she has a prominent glass cabinet, the type that would be used as the cashier station in a restaurant, but it is now just a sideboard covered with figurines. The apartment is filled with little statues (but significantly not the common Buddhist altar found at the door of most Hong Kong shops). This syncretic collection could remind a U.S. audience of a *curandera* or fortune-teller shop which are often filled with an eclectic assortment of religious items.

The most startling domestic detail is revealed only when Mr. Li is in the middle of taking Mei from behind on the table.

Chairman Mao Tse-tung in a salute, the Catholic Virgin Mary, several versions of Guan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion who is recognized in Buddhist, Taoist, and some Southeast Asian Christian traditions, as the patron of mothers and children, a fertility goddess, and champion of the unfortunate, sick, disabled, and poor. Also in the foreground, a cat teapot with the spout being its upraised paw.



Continuing to pan right: a figure of a peasant militia woman with a Red Guard armband, marking her from the Cultural Revolution Era (1966-76); another Buddha and a Hello Kitty making the familiar beckoning gesture of the Maneki Neko (Japanese Fortune Cat); another cat teapot with the feline holding a carp for the spout. In other shots we see a seated six-armed Shiva, other Hello Kitties, Buddhas with cherubs, and colored prints of Chinese New Year Babies (by tradition, fat and happy and surrounded by images of abundance).

He suddenly sees a color portrait of a young woman, and realizes it is Mei, 44 years earlier. Mr. Li suddenly realizes who is in the photo. The picture commemorates a school variety show presentation. Earlier Mei performed a song and dance while Mrs. Li ate her dumplings.

Rough is the nature of Lake Hung  
My home is on the shore  
At dawn, boats go out with nets  
At dawn, they return loaded with fish  
Wild ducks and lotus roots are here  
The scent of rice fills out autumn air  
They say heaven is beautiful  
How can it compare with my Lake Hung  
— “Hong Hu Shi Lanag Da Lang” (Waves After Waves in Honghu Lake”)

This revolutionary song was written for a successful music and dance theatre piece in 1959. It was made into a very popular film (*Hong Hu Chi Wei Dui*, d. Xie Tian, 1961) depicting how the Red Army in 1930 lead local people to fight against the Nationalist army. As with many of the revolutionary operas, the protagonist is a woman who leads the guerilla forces against the warlord bandits. The song, opera, and film were favorites of the 1960s generation.

Mei reprises the song when she visits the Li's mansion and swims in their outdoor swimming pool. As an orchestral theme, it comes up in the film's final sequence, providing a bitter irony comparing a nostalgic remembrance of the revolution with the possessive individualism of the capitalist present as Mrs. Li begins to chop up the fresh fetus.



Mr. Li suddenly realizes who is in the photo. The picture commemorates a school variety show presentation.

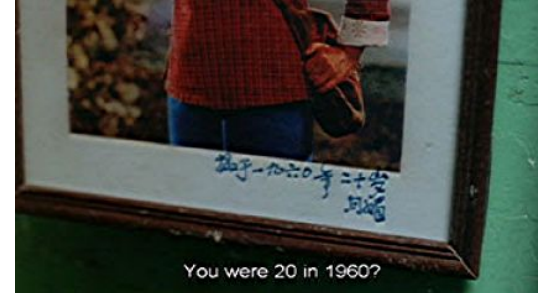


Earlier Mei performed a song and dance while Mrs. Li ate her dumplings.





"Campus Variety Show"



"Photographed in 1960 at the age of 20. Yue Mei."



On Mrs. Li's first visit, Mei served the dumplings ...



... and then began to perform.

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### *Dumplings theory*

If I was writing this ten years ago (except for the fact the film didn't exist until 2004), I could have been very up-to-date by discussing how *Dumplings* fit into the "culture of disappearance" of the 1997 Handover. (Although Ackbar Abbas actually wrote about the "politics of disappearance" in his book, politics seems to always be what disappears in cultural studies.) And I could go on about how Mei "disappears" back into the Mainland.

Or I could have discussed Hong Kong as an "imagined community," or China the same way, reminding the reader that nationalism is no longer a hip cultural concept, albeit seemingly still effective for starting wars, ethnic cleansing, and other destructive activities.

Or I could have gone on about Hong Kong's "post-colonial" status, pleasantly ignoring that the USA is a post-colonial country, and that Hong Kong has never been post-colonial, passing from one nation to another without any independence.

Mei could have been called a "flexible citizen" since she moves back and forth from the PRC to Hong Kong and back again. Or I could have gestured at "cosmopolitics" or "transnationalism."

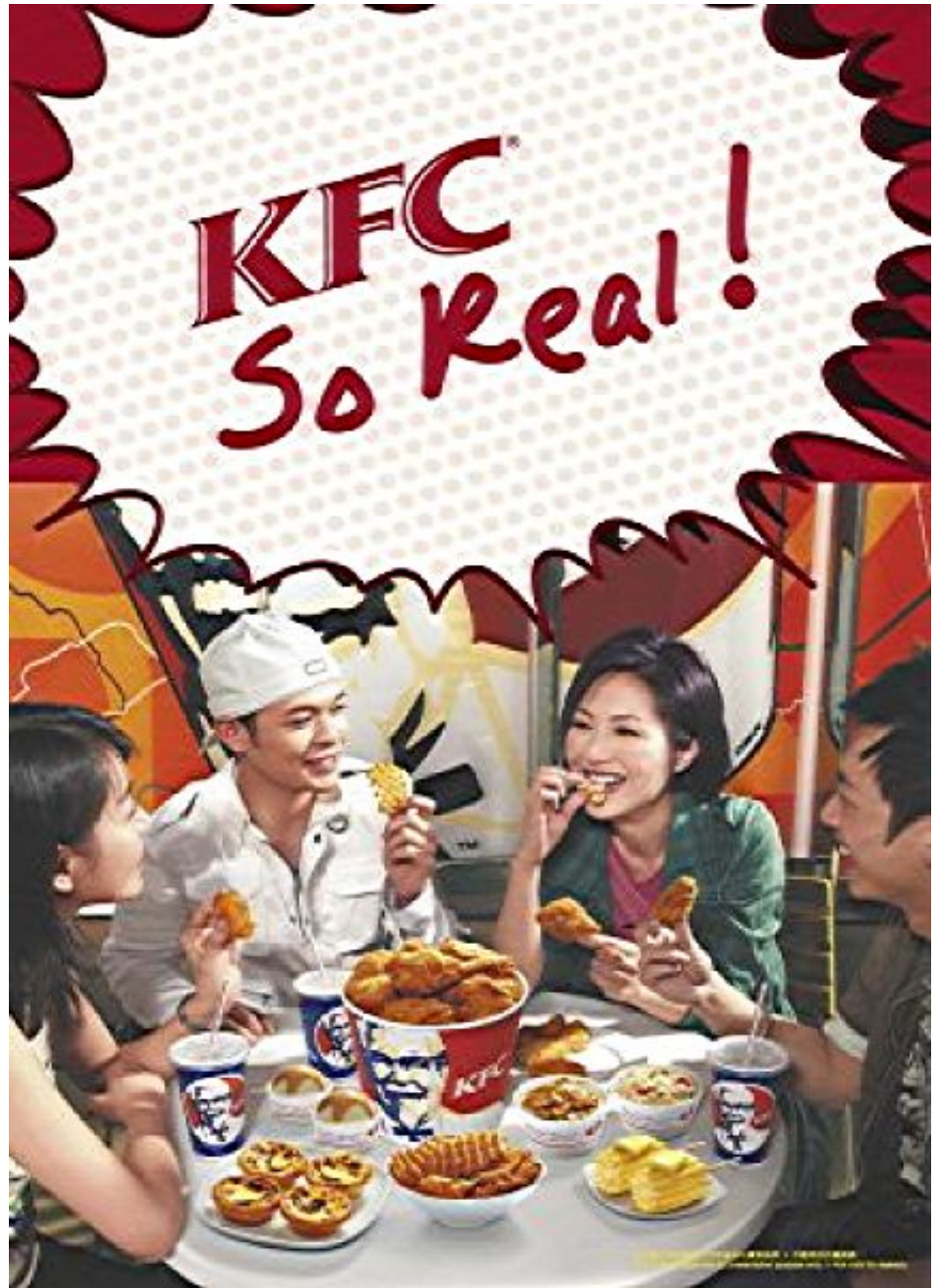
And I could structure the whole essay around History and Memory, or Trauma and Amnesia, or Remembering and Forgetting.

I could have. But I was more interested in Fruit Chan's wicked humor and dark vision of how corrupt capitalist culture is; and how poignant the situation of its victims appears. If Mrs. Li becomes a monster, fitting the common trope of horror films, we still come to understand what made her one, what structural limits pushed her to that state. If Mei is an ethically and morally dubious protagonist, she is still an intriguing one. History moves on, society changes, and she still serves the people: now it's dumplings.

# Afterword

From the M&C Saatchi website:

[http://www.mcsaatchi.com/news\\_article.php?id=26](http://www.mcsaatchi.com/news_article.php?id=26)



"KFC has taken the next step in its 'So Real' campaign, hiring independent film director Fruit Chan, known for his cinema verite style, to direct its latest TVC, which partners singer and actress Miriam Yeung with local popstar Justin.

'The approach is quite unexpected in the fast food category in Hong Kong. We tried to display the more genuine side of things.'

Emily Wong, senior marketing manager of KFC's local franchisee, Birdland, said:

'The two young popular celebrities Miriam and Justin will further enhance KFC's brand image of being genuine and real.'

The ad, which was due to break in early May, is the first TVC for KFC from M&C Saatchi since winning the brief earlier this year. Mindshare worked on media for the campaign, while A-World Consulting handled PR. The underlying theme of the ad is that 'the taste of real chicken ignites the real you', while print and outdoor extend the idea of 'igniting the real self'. As part of this, giant digital displays will be put up in KFC's major outlets in the city, where customers can submit what they really want to say and have these phrases posted up on the display."

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### Notes

1. Chinese saying quoted in Gina Marchetti, "Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema," in Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 289-313.
2. I do not speak or read Chinese, and I've relied on a number of people who gave me good advice and information for this article: Jenny Lau, Ting Wang, Li Zeng, Evans Chan, David Li, Kin-yan Szeto, Kate Sullivan and Gina Marchetti. Any errors of interpretation are mine alone.
3. Her acting career began with the TV series "Mei mei ting wong" (A Recipe for the Heart) in 1997.
4. In Chinese "Uncle" and "Auntie" is a voluntary honorific title given to any older person, irrespective of familial relation which signals maintaining filial piety. Similarly, an elderly woman would be referred to as "Grandma" irrespective of whether she actually had grandchildren. Thus "Auntie Mei" signals the character's actual age in relation to the narrative, and is ironic in that she actually appears to be about 35, the age of Bai Ling, the actor. The character's full name is Yue Mei. The character accepts the title, although in fact she was an MD in China and by all rights could call herself "Doctor."
5. These date from the early 1950s when a vast wave of immigrants from the Mainland arrived and lived homeless or in shantytowns and other marginal ways while working, typically, for minimum wages in light manufacturing such as clothing production. Public housing was a response to the social crisis.
6. An exception is the joking that sometimes goes on around fetal sonograms — increasingly common in monitoring pregnancy — and easily producing a video or still visual

record. In turn fake images with an animated fetus doing impossible things such as dancing, eating and drinking, etc. can be amusing, even “cute.”

7. Of course medical practitioners had experiential knowledge gained from both living and deceased fetuses and mothers.

8. It's not clear if those images resulted from a miscarriage or a deliberately induced abortion. Similarly, some demonstrators waved objects they described as human fetuses (in jars as with medical specimens; or in plastic bags with “blood” — if that's what it was) as part of the theater of their events. sometimes claiming they had salvaged the object from the waste bins of a hospital or abortion clinic.. It should also be acknowledged that the antics of some extreme parts of the anti-abortion movement were disapproved by other parts. Waving a human fetus (or more likely an animal fetus) or displaying bloody pictures of them seemed to many to undermine the respect for human life that was the presumed motivation of the activists. Yet, in-your-face screaming at women entering clinics, death threats and assaults (including assassination in a few cases) against abortion providers were visible, publicly enacted, and often defended by members of the anti-abortion movement.

9. Sol Worth, "Pictures Can't Say Ain't," *Studying Visual Communications* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 162-184.

10. In contrast, those who argue against stem cell research always want to use the loaded term “embryonic” before the phrase “stem cell,” to make the connection to human. However, visual representations of the source of those cells has to be avoided, since it just shows a hollow ball of cells (blastula), which can be identified as having “life” in the same way one-celled organisms do, but which, at this stage, has no plausible visual signs of being human in the present or in future development.

11. For readers outside the framework of U.S. culture: opinion polling has consistently shown a nearly equally divided public and electorate on abortion, with a large “middle” dubious about abortion as a birth control procedure combined with belief that such decisions should be private rather than subject to state intervention, which is precisely why neither side has been able to effectively and completely overrule the other side.

12. Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Chow specifically discusses *Temptress Moon*, *The Road Home*, *Song of the Exile*, *East a Bowl of Tea*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *Blind Shaft*, *The River*, *In the Mood for Love*, *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, *Happy Times*, *Happy Together*, *Not One Less* and ends with a short discussion of how *Brokeback Mountain* continues the sentimental mode.

13. Chow does not consider popular commercial works or genres such as legendary films, action, police/triad, romantic comedy, physical comedy, horror, musical, children and teen film, etc. Nor does she look at more independent or dissident work.

14. In her apartment there is a sign, typical of small restaurants, with her name (Yue=moon; Mei=enchanted, fascinating, charming) and “Ge” = attic, loft, garret” which is a picturesque name indicating a restaurant. Thus “Yue Mei’s Loft” indicating Mei as proprietor, or “Enchanting Moon Loft” as following the traditional Chinese naming for a business indicating something beautiful and/or fortunate. I have not been able to read the novella, which is not in English translation.

15. Other notable films he shot: *Infernal Affairs* (2002), *Hero* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *Temptress Moon* (1996), *That Day, on the Beach* (1983).

16. Wendy Gan, *Fruit Chan’s Durian Durian* (HK: Hong Kong University Press, 2005) p. 53.

17. Gan, p. 56.

18. Ian Johnston, “Compliments to the Chef: *Three ... Extremes: Dumplings*”

<<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/dumplings.htm>>

Johnston makes two understandable errors: the mother does not die; she is found by the police in shock and splattered with blood after stabbing her husband; and the mistress works as a masseuse in the hotel. She is not of the same class as her client.





